



Reclaiming Your I.D.entity in Christ: Photo ID

Ephesians 2:10-22

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

October 23, 2016

We are considering this month what it means to reclaim your true identity in Christ. We are working with the belief that your identity is the truest thing about you, and that your identity will shape all of your behaviors: what you say, how you act, even what you think. However, as we named last week, while our identity will shape our behaviors, we have a bad habit of claiming for our identity a Fake ID; that is, we claim an identity that isn't a true representation of who we fully are. By claiming this Fake ID for our Valid ID, we end up behaving in ways that do not reflect our true identity.

We began last week by looking at our Valid ID – who are we at the core? Paul says in Ephesians 1 that we are holy and blameless children of God. Verse 5 says, “God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.” That is to say, God chose us; in the adoption process, God decided that you were to be a child of the Lord most high. Our truest identity, the identity that defines us each, is that we are called, claimed, holy, and blameless children of God. We pick up this morning in Ephesians 2 with verse 10 that continues Paul’s claim regarding our identity. It reads, “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Before the foundation of the Earth, Paul says, we were claimed by God for a given purpose – to live out the love of God as witnessed in Jesus Christ in the world. *That* identity is what God says we should be claiming as our identity. When we claim our identity as God’s children, divined for good works, then our behavior will model that same love that created us.

What happens when we give in to false claims of identity? Our behaviors begin to represent an identity that is not fully in line with God’s love.

This morning we’re going to take a look at some of the false identities we assume: those that are defined by our Photo ID.

As I spoke with the children in our Children’s Message last week, quite often we are defined by others in the world by those descriptions that are visible to the naked eye. We are described and defined by others by those traits that we see in the mirror. The comments we receive regarding our visible representation often drive our unhealthy behaviors.

We live in a world that is driven by perception – we named that last week. If you want to test this theory, just take gander at any Facebook or Instagram feed. Let me tell you how unhealthy it is to post a picture of yourself on a social media site. Let me describe for you what I consider to be one of the unhealthiest practices that exists in the world today. Ready ... I take a selfie and I doctor the picture up just a bit to make it ‘pop;’ I throw a filter on the image to make my skin look nice and soft; I throw some color enhancements on the picture to make my eye color stand out; and then I crop the image to ensure that only my best side is showing. Once I have the image looking *real* good, and I mean *reallll*

good, like, Glamour Shots good, I put the image up on every social media account I have, and I sit back and wait.

And then it starts. The comments, the likes, the shares ... they start rolling in. If you're like any of the millions of people who put selfies or photos of any kind up on social media, you know that you can sit and obsess over every comment that rolls in. This practice is an issue that is going to continue to be a detriment to our society for some years to come. See, what happens when we sit back and wait for those comments, likes, and shares, is that we start to place our value – our identity – into the hands of others. “We are training ourselves to see ourselves through the eyes of others.”ⁱ We start to take the comments of others and assume an identity that is formed by their input. It's part of what can be called the “early and often factor.”ⁱⁱ

When we hear things about ourselves early in life, and when we hear it time and time again throughout our life, we begin to assume that what's being said is truth. It doesn't matter if it isn't true, we assume it to be true because so many people are saying it, and they've been saying it for a while, and they say it often, so we take it to heart. As we learned last week in Proverbs 23:7, when we believe something in our hearts, even something false about ourselves, that belief becomes our reality. False or not, if we hear it early and often enough, we claim it as our own. Once we claim it, we begin to live out of that false identity.

Let's look at a couple of examples.

I gave the examples last week of my own childhood, where I was described as a jock, a drummer, and a church boy. I assure you, these were some of the nicer words used to describe me. In middle school, I was an offensive lineman because for my age, I was quite heavy. My weight became a visible trait for which others had specific names. I have also dealt with oily skin my entire life, and my visible acne growing up became the platform for jokes, which included unpleasant names of their own. Many times the words that others use to describe us, especially those that come early and often, are words we'd rather not hear. Yet, hearing such words early and often enough, we begin to assume an identity marked by those words. Some examples may include: slow, lazy, ugly, short, fat, or uncontrollable and overactive.

Other times, the words we hear early and often are words that are thought highly of. These may be words we think are good words to shape our identity because they are applauded traits. Some examples include: musician, intellect, athlete, leader, beautiful, handsome, or charismatic. These words that are used to describe us aren't necessarily bad, but when they become the truest thing about us, they often lead us to live and behave in ways that are not marked by the identity Paul says is our truest identity, as first and foremost, we are claimed children of God.

Our Photo ID – the identification that is given us by the world around us – is often manifest by one of six criteria.

First, we are identified by our behavior. People look at things we've done, and define us – that is, define our identity – by our behavior. Examples include: smokers, world travelers, or workaholics. We

are described by our behavior, those descriptions start to shape our identity, and then because it has shaped our identity, we continue to behave in the same manner.

Second, we are identified by our desires. A great example is our classification of people by their sexual orientation. We define people, we give them an identity, based on their sexual desires. We use words like straight or gay to identify people, as if their ontological being is defined only by their sexual desire. Other examples would include wine connoisseurs or philanthropists. People assume an identity that shapes every act, thought, and word, because of a small or great passion or desire in their life. Again, while not always a bad thing, never the truest thing.

Third, we are defined by our mistakes. People label us by our failures. We are bankrupt; we are divorced; we are addicts; we are cons; or we are delinquent. Our mistakes, called out and used to define us, begin to shape our identity, and then every behavior to come is marked by these titles that we have assumed, even though they do not define our truest identity.

Forth, we are marked by our abilities. We are dancers or musicians, scientists or mathematicians, sales persons or shoppers. Our abilities are defined, and those definitions begin to shape our identity. And all of a sudden, we are living out of identities that, while not untrue, do not tell the full story of who we are as called and claimed children of God.

Fifth, we are determined by our DNA. We are predestined to greatness or failure because of our parents or grandparents. We are expected to follow in the footsteps of our moms and dads. We are also given titles like Native Americans, Africans, Anglo-Saxons ... or less pleasantly, aliens ... because of our DNA or our ancestral heritage. We are assumed to live out of an identity that was defined for us by those in our family lineage.

Finally, sixth, we are recognized by our relationships. We are someone else's spouse, or someone's father or mother, or perhaps we are someone's boss or employee. Our identity, that which is assumed for us by others around us, is designated by our relationships with others. When we claim those identities for ourselves, they begin to shape our behaviors. Again, not necessarily a bad thing, but perhaps never quite the truest identity as beloved children of God.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he is dealing with a large population of people who had been identified by their Photo ID. The Gentiles were a group of converted Christians who had never been a part of the Jewish faith. The Jewish population only made up about 10% of the Roman Empire. The newly found Christian Church, which was centered in the different countries of the Roman Empire, was made up primarily of Gentiles who were converting from what at the time was defined as an atheistic belief. That is, they believed in a variety of pagan gods and practices, but never in the one true God of Israel.

Starting in verse 11, we see that the Gentiles were being defined by their past physical traits – their historical Photo ID. Paul says it this way, "Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth (they are being defined by their DNA), called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' (they are being labeled by their physical traits, the Gentiles and the Jews), being aliens from the

commonwealth of Israel (they are being labeled by their physical location, they had not grown up in the land of Israel), and strangers to the covenants of the promise had no hope without God in the world. (they are being labeled by their lack of faith in God in the past, or perhaps just by their lack of religion in general).”

There is no question from an outsider’s perspective that the Gentiles and the Jews were very different people. They had very different backgrounds; very different religious customs; they lived in different regions. Yet, Paul says beginning in verse 13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the Apostle’s and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

Don’t miss the richness of what Paul is saying here. Paul is again emphasizing that the Photo ID, the physical representation of the two groups, is no longer going to be the foundational identity for either group. Circumcised or not, living in the land of Israel or not, being born of Hebrew lineage or not, having ever believed in God before or not ... none of these things will be the foundation for our identity any longer. We will not longer be separated because of these physical traits. What God has done in Christ, is that the two have become one. They have been given this new foundational identity because of the work of God in Jesus Christ on the cross.

That’s not to say these differences don’t exist. Yet, these differences, which in the past have been the identifiable traits that defined our behavior and called for division – even for hostility, as it is mentioned twice in this passage – are no longer to be seen as issues that cause division. They are no longer the basis of our identity. Instead, our call by God to be faithful, the love of God in Jesus Christ, is the basis for our new identity, and should shape all our behaviors as unified children of God.

“The world that we know and inhabit is fallen, divided, suspicious, and full of the possibility and threat of self-destruction. The apostle’s teaching holds out the hope and prospect of a reconciled, unified, and amicable society.”ⁱⁱⁱ If you’re watching the news, and you’re keeping up even the slightest amount of information with the upcoming election, you know that the differences between us in our nation are boiling over the top. Every party, every candidate, every person running for office from the local to the national level – they are all making gross misrepresentations of large groups of people based on their Photo IDs, as if our Photo IDs are the truest thing about us. But we know – we know that our distinctions as seen in our Photo IDs, while offering some of the beauty of the tapestry of God’s creation, these distinctions should not put us at odds with one another. We know that these differences are not the basis for discrimination or alienation. We know that our Photo IDs do not fully define who we are. We know these things because of the love of God in Jesus Christ, which gives us a truer identity than any other name, trait, or visible characteristic.

See, the one who defines us, it's not the politician who wants your vote, it's the God who gave you a voice; it's not those who say you aren't worth enough, it's the Holy Provider who says I've given you all you need; it's not those who says you aren't smart enough, it's the Eternal Enlightener who says I'll teach you with my Word; it's not any person who has kicked you out, it's the Heavenly Adopter who has taken you in; Paul says, you are not abandoned or left out because of any definable trait about you ... no, you have not been abandoned, you have been adopted and claimed as a holy, blameless, and loved child of God.

So may you live, and may your behavior be shaped not by some Fake Photo ID, but by God's claim on your life, and by your true identity as a child of the Lord God, who claims you as his own in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Kyle Idleman. *Photo ID*. <https://www.southeastchristian.org> Retrieved October 19, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Ralph P. Martin. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 1992.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*.